

Back Cast

By Ron Wilson



I don't know Bob. Don't know where he's from or if he's even still around. For all I know, Bob is short for Bobette, so all my gender references from here on are incorrect.

I have seen his work, however. Not in person, but in a photo by Greg Gullickson, North Dakota Game and Fish Department outreach biologist, Minot. Bob painted a paddlefish on a log that could have washed ashore from 25 yards upstream or 25 miles.

The photo was taken in 2005, or thereabouts, so there is a chance Bob's work has been ushered farther downstream by spring runoff, and is now hung up in the shallows of the Missouri River or anchored against an island until the next good melt.

While Bob's painting is a decent likeness of a paddlefish – not the easiest thing to craft on a weathered log, I'd have to imagine – that's not what strikes me. What does it say that someone would take the time, was moved enough to lug paint and brushes down to the river to paint a boneless, prehistoric fish, easily recognized by its unmistakable paddle-like bill.

Pablo Picasso, one of the most recognizable figures of 20th century art, said "Painting is just another way of keeping a diary." Maybe that's what Bob was doing when he painted his fish. Detailing the taxing tug of war with a 60-pound paddlefish he snagged from the confluence of the Yellowstone and Missouri rivers located in country that remains wild enough to inspire.

Then again, perhaps the act was not nearly that romantic. Maybe there was nothing at all spontaneous about it. If so, that's OK, too. Either way, I still find the painting curious, but I'm glad he didn't do it on the sly on the side of something more enduring. Like an abandoned farmhouse or barn – structures that will likely stand for years without the threat of getting escorted downstream by runoff.

There is a stretch of river I used to fish habitually out West, not because the fishing was that incredible, but because it was such a sonofagun to access. This meant I'd have the place to myself, save for the occasional rattlesnake soaking up the last heat of the day

on one of the many rock slides that made navigating in the falling light such fun.

There's a place on the river where the water shallows and slows. It's not holding water for trout, but ducks like it. And so did a hunter at one time. Once when I wasn't hellbent on getting upstream, I caught the wink of submerged metal. I would have guessed a fishing lure when I bent to pick it up, but it was a spent shotgun shell.

I liked the idea that someone had hunted ducks here at one time. It was a slog to get to this piece of water, and would have been even tougher carrying a shotgun, lunch, thermos, a few decoys, and maybe a folding stool to sit on. His choice of hunting spots showed commitment, and certainly an interest in getting away from the crowds.

If you looked closely, which I hadn't on a number of passes, you could make out a makeshift blind of rocks and tree limbs that blended in nicely enough with the surroundings.

An old tree provided the foundation and was the centerpiece of the duck hunter's hideout. The blind, which looked so unremarkable from the water and a duck's point of view, was a cozy hideaway. I had to stoop to get inside, and felt as if the tree's limbs were in mid-pause before closing in to give a bear hug. Getting a shot off out of this thing would have been a trick, but maybe pulling the trigger was secondary.

On a flat part of the tree were the carvings of a half-dozen ducks – four at rest on the water and two, feet down and wings spread, coming in for a landing. The entire scene would have fit on a sheet of paper.

The ducks were faded and beginning to stretch like someone working a piece of Silly Putty between their fingers, but were still detailed enough that they didn't look like they could have been crafted by someone simply wielding a pocketknife, but maybe carving tools.

At the time, I thought what I'd found was pretty cool. In my mind, it was a place of escape for an old duck hunter who didn't shoulder his shotgun as much anymore, although he did bring it with him each time as it gave his outings purpose. He kept showing up, however, because he liked the river, loved seeing the ducks question what few decoys he could haul, and he knew he'd have it all to himself.

Today, that same stretch of river is easily accessible by vehicle, and you'd be hard pressed in some spots not to interrupt your back cast on someone mowing their lawn. Unfortunately, the lure of the place, like the duck hunter's tree, is long gone.

